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April 17, 1964

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: The Implications of a Chinese
Communist Nuclear Capability

This is a very terse summary indeed of a major planning exercise conducted over the past year on an interdepartmental basis by Robert Johnson of the Policy Planning Council.

More extensive materials on this question can be supplied, should you wish further to be briefed.

Issue 2 (a) -- when pre-emptive action against ChiCom nuclear facilities would be feasible and desirable in the U.S. interest -- is the subject of further intensive staffing on a particularly secure basis.

W. E. Rostow

Attachment

Paper - The Implications of a
Chinese Communist
Nuclear Capability

S/S-RO

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The Implications of a Chinese Communist Nuclear Capability

I. Summary and Key Issues

1. The Threat. The great disproportion between U.S. and Chinese Communist nuclear capabilities makes Chinese first-use of nuclear weapons highly unlikely. Communist China will try rather to use its nuclear capability to weaken the will of Asian countries, to stimulate divisions among them, to put political pressure on the U.S. military presence in the area; and to obtain support for Chinese claims to status as a world power.

2. Our Purposes. Actions to deal with this threat will not involve major policy changes. The principal policy issues posed are the following:

(a) Should the U.S. engage in pre-emptive military action against identified ChiCom nuclear facilities? (Conclusion: Would be undesirable except as part of military action against the mainland in response to major ChiCom aggression. Prospects for covert action should receive continued examination.)

(b) What kind of U.S. military posture would be most appropriate in Asia? (Conclusion: Our posture should combine an implicit nuclear threat and a visible ability to deal conventionally with Communist aggression. Emphasis should be given to dual-capable and seaborne forces.)

(c) How can Asian states best be offered assurance of U.S. defense against nuclear attack? (Conclusion: We should combine (i) general public unilateral declaration of willingness to provide nuclear defense; (ii) assurances to allies under existing security commitment; (iii) offers to neutrals of a declaratory commitment to consult; (iv) offers to deploy nuclear weapons in event of nuclear threats.)

(d) How can the U.S. continue to demonstrate its peaceful and protective intentions? (Conclusion: Positive statement of U.S. interest in involving the ChiComs in disarmament negotiations; development of the Asian components of our arms control plan; statements and actions emphasizing U.S. commitment to peace and disarmament.)

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II. Discussion

1. Although our information on Communist China's advanced weapons program has improved, gaps are still substantial and uncertainties, considerable. While the ChiComs might detonate a nuclear device at any time, it is more probable that their first test will not occur until late this year or some time next and it could be even later. With its one known plutonium reactor it could initially produce only one or two crude weapons per year. (Other plutonium reactors may, of course, exist.) A more substantial program would require completion of its gaseous diffusion plant which was left unfinished when the USSR withdrew its aid. This might be accomplished in 1966, but is more likely to take until 1968-69 or much later. Initial delivery means will be confined to a possible force of fifteen B-29 type bombers and two medium jet bombers (if operational). However, the Chinese appear to be concentrating upon missiles - initially upon a medium range (630 or 1020 nautical mile) missile.

2. A Communist Chinese nuclear capability will be more important for its political than for its direct military effects.

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effects. As their regional (non-intercontinental) capability develops, the Chinese Communists would eventually be able to do significant, but hardly crippling, damage to the United States by attacking U.S. forces and installations in Asia, but the U.S. will have the ability to destroy Communist China as a modern governmental and war-making entity. This great asymmetry in Chinese Communist and U.S. nuclear capabilities and vulnerabilities makes Chinese Communist first-use of nuclear weapons highly unlikely except in the event of an attack upon the China mainland which threatened the existence of the regime.

3. Apart from serving as an additional inhibition on some levels of U.S. attack upon the mainland, a Chinese nuclear capability need impose no new military restrictions on the U.S. response to aggression in Asia (e.g., on amphibious operations). A limited ChiCom intercontinental capability, when and if achieved, would not eliminate this basic asymmetry. But the Chinese Communists (and non-Communist Asians) might believe that such a capability would have increased effect as a deterrent because of an unwillingness by the U.S. to assume the risks, in situations in which its interests were

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marginally engaged, of the absolute level of damage which the ChiComs could inflict. However, the credibility of the ChiCom deterrent would continue to be very low because of the evident unlikelihood of ChiCom first-use of nuclear weapons.

4. Whatever actual U.S. intentions, so long as the ChiComs have only soft, vulnerable delivery means, they will have to take account of the danger of a U.S. nuclear or non-nuclear counterforce attack as a possible U.S. response to major ChiCom aggression. This could increase ChiCom caution.

5. Past Chinese Communist prudence in the use of military force reenforces conclusions emerging from military logic. Historically the ChiComs have consistently followed Mao's well-known dictum to "strategically despise but tactically respect" the enemy; have been very sensitive to the possibility of attack upon the mainland; and have sought to avoid actions which might provoke major military confrontation and thus increase the likelihood of such attack. Peiping differs from Moscow not in its willingness to assume large military risks by undertaking inter-state aggression, but in estimating somewhat lower the danger that active support for "wars of national liberation" or limited military actions on its borders

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its borders could lead to dangerous escalation. When the Chinese have a nuclear capability they are likely to remain aware of their relative military inferiority though they will attempt to create the impression that the balance of power in Asia has shifted.

6. Thus, the basic military problems we will face are likely to be much like those we face now: military probing operations designed to test the level of the U.S. commitment and response; relatively low-level border wars; and "revolutionary" wars. To the extent that there is danger of miscalculation by Peiping it is less likely to arise from overestimation of its military strength than from optimistic estimates of the psychological situation in Asia, and with respect to the reactions of the U.S., or possibly, U.S. European allies. Miscalculation is less likely to express itself in high-risk military actions than in somewhat increased willingness to accept risks in a process of gradual escalation designed to test U.S. response against the background of Communist China's new capability.

7. The ChiComs will value their nuclear capability as a deterrent to attack on the mainland and for its psychological effects in weakening the will of countries resisting insurgency,

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in inhibiting their requests for U.S. assistance and in stimulating and exploiting divisions within Asia and between Asian countries and the West. It will be used to put political pressure on the U.S. military presence and to obtain support for Chinese claims to preeminence in Asia and status as a world power.

8. Peiping's tactics are likely to have two broad strands: (a) seeking to instill fear of its power; and (b) emphasizing its peaceful and protective intentions and attempting to demonstrate that it is U.S. nuclear power that brings the danger of nuclear war to Asia.

9. Asian countries will seek (or at least welcome) U.S. actions of reassurance. At the same time neutrals particularly may push harder for an Asian nuclear free zone, Chinese Communist membership in the U.N., participation in disarmament negotiations, etc. A ChiCom nuclear capability could have some effect in undermining remaining belief in return to the mainland on Taiwan and in eroding international support for the GRC. A ChiCom nuclear capability does not make a serious military effort to take the offshores more likely, but might be exploited for politically divisive effect

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in an offshores crisis although this, too, while possible is not considered likely.

10. A ChiCom capability is likely initially to confirm both aligned and non-aligned in their present policies. Longer-term effects will depend upon U.S. action and upon the general evolution of the Asian situation. A ChiCom capability in itself seems unlikely to stimulate a significant increase in willingness of Asians to cooperate in defense or non-defense matters but may have marginal reenforcing effect upon such tendencies as exist, particularly if the U.S. takes appropriate action to strengthen these tendencies.

11. Desires for reassurance are likely to express themselves in requests for (a) new or confirmation of existing defense guarantees and specific application of these to nuclear defense; (b) various forms of nuclear cooperation; and (c) increased conventional military assistance, particularly air defense. With the U.S. nuclear deterrent in the background, an evident U.S. will and ability to respond rapidly to Communist aggression without undue reliance upon nuclear weapons will be an important form of reassurance to Asian nations and a deterrent to ChiCom miscalculation.

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12. Of the two potential non-Communist nuclear powers in Asia (India and Japan), India is the more likely to seek a nuclear capability in the foreseeable future.

13. Availability of Korean and Philippine bases does not seem likely to be affected by a ChiCom nuclear capability as such nor does access to Thai bases, provided U.S. words and actions provide evidence of a continuing strong commitment to Thai defense. Dramatic effects on access to Japanese bases are not likely, though there will be some increased tendency toward restriction.

14. The USSR will be concerned that a nuclear capability will increase Peiping's prestige and influence in the Communist world and among the developing countries. While it very probably realizes that the ChiComs are unlikely to be reckless, the USSR will fear Chinese miscalculation that could lead to situations in which it would be forced to choose between coming to the aid of a Communist state (e.g., North Vietnam) or failing to perform its role as protector of the Communist world. Ultimate ChiCom dependence upon the Soviet nuclear umbrella could give the USSR some residual influence over Peiping in crisis situations. Soviet cooperation with the U.S.

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in containing Communist China is more likely to be tacit
than explicit.

S/P:R.H.Johnson
April 16, 1964

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